United Nations E/CN.5/2007/NGO/4

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2006

Original: English

Commission for Social Development
Forty-fifth session
7-16 February 2007
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: promoting full employment and decent work for all

Statement submitted by International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 2006.

* E/CN.5/2007/1.

06-63848 (E) 191206

Statement

Background

1. In Copenhagen in 1995, Governments agreed that the eradication of poverty, expansion of productive employment and reduction of unemployment, and social integration are the three pillars of social development. However, the persistence of poverty and social exclusion continues to have a serious impact on the achievement of full employment. Social exclusion, as a manifestation of extreme poverty, means that many initiatives to increase employment do not positively impact the poorest members of society.

2. The founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, Joseph Wresinski, defined extreme poverty as follows: "A lack of basic security is the absence of one or more factors that enable individuals and families to assume professional, family and social responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may become more extended and lead to more serious and permanent consequences. Extreme poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people's lives, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibility in the foreseeable future."[1]

3. Employment is a major route for people to obtain security and participate in and contribute to society. Wresinski said that "In today's society, the principal security of individuals and families is employment and it determines, to a large extent, whether people have basic security in other fields. Disadvantaged people are no different in wanting security of a job."[2]

4. Those living in extreme poverty should be at the heart of all efforts to eradicate poverty and their wishes and expectations for themselves and their families should be taken into account. When the most excluded people contribute their knowledge and experience to society as equals, extreme poverty can start to be overcome.

5. The International Movement ATD Fourth World hopes that the Commission for Social Development will address the issue of reaching those living in extreme poverty by calling for the development of inclusive employment programmes that prioritize access for the poorest.

Challenges from the field

6. The work that many people living in poverty do is often invisible to wider society, and considered to have little value. This can adversely impact anti-poverty efforts. In East Africa, a local government and an international donor, replaced an open fish market with a modern market building that now houses the vendors and some local services. Although a consultation was completed, certain groups of workers within the market were not visible and therefore not taken into account in

[1] Report presented by Leandro Despouy to the Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination Measures and Protection of Minorities. United Nations, Geneva (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13), Annex III.

[2] Wresinski, J. (1987). Grande Pauvreté et Précarité Economique et Sociale. (Chronic Poverty and Lack of Basic Security. Translation and Introduction 1994 by New/Fourth World Movement), p. 71.

the planning. Many of the youths who did odd jobs at the market, as well as other very poor market workers, were excluded from the new market. Their poverty and social exclusion led not only to a failure for them to benefit from this change, but actually eliminated their livelihood.

7. Experiences such as this demonstrate that there are many obstacles faced by the poorest in their efforts to engage in employment. The social stigma of poverty, daily shame, and humiliation are important factors. A low skill base or lack of recognition of unofficial skills in competitive labour markets also adds to "the poverty trap" in which the poorest often find themselves. Living in a difficult environment that lacks infrastructure and on the "fringes" of society, is another factor limiting access to employment opportunities. Several years ago families living close to the central market in a Central American City were relocated from living alongside the railway track which was located next to the market. They now find themselves much further away from the market and their means of subsistence.[3] This dislocation had serious implications not just in terms of work, but also for the well-being of the families in general.

Good practices

8. Innovative projects can build confidence, trust and the skill base of excluded people to be better prepared to obtain more stable employment and improved working conditions. In France a project created in 2002 called "Travailler et Apprendre Ensemble[4] (T.A.E.)" — (Work and Learn Together) stresses the priority of work as a space for independence for very excluded people who, due to the tremendous pressures of living in poverty, need extra support and time to regain confidence in themselves and their ability to work again. TAE is sensitive to the different needs and learning rhythms of each person. Besides learning practical skills such as computer reconditioning, cleaning and building maintenance, TAE employees learn to work in teams and acquire other important employment skills. TAE also works with other organizations and employees to develop employment policies that take into account people and their competencies, not just their resumes.

9. Another theme related to employment opportunities for the most excluded is that of Information Technology (IT). Rapid technological advancements are becoming a serious barrier not only in the workplace but also in society at large. Very poor and excluded people struggle to keep up, unless there is a real effort to support them. In Madagascar in 2006 the International Movement ATD Fourth World signed an agreement[5] with two major telecommunication companies to provide Internet access to youths and craftsmen for them to develop their crafts business and sell online. This initiative aims at creating stable and decent work for the most excluded people, and requires the long-term support of committed individuals to ensure that the project remains truly inclusive for those with the most difficulties.

[3] How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights Quart Monde Editions, Mery sur Oise, 2004, published in English and French, page 28.

[4] For more information see www.tae-asso.org

[5] For more information see http://www.alcatel.fr/sustainable/DigitalBridge/index.htm

Dignity

10. People living in poverty find dignity in work that may not be evident to others, because this work gives them an opportunity to imagine a future for themselves and their children. A woman from Central America testified on October 17, 2006, "I work in a landfill, separating the recyclables from the garbage. In this work there are many risks. In January there was an accident, when a landslide of garbage buried and killed eight people: their bodies could not be recovered. In spite of this, I don't feel like less of a person, because I am working for the future of my children." Employment is a source of security, social integration, and dignity for the poorest. Members of the International Movement ATD Fourth World who are living in extreme poverty, said that "When you have a job, it gives confidence in yourself", "They despise you if you don't work. At school children are ashamed to admit that their father has no job."

11. Periods of unemployment demoralize and further marginalize people, aggravating their despair and mistrust in society. Wresinski insisted that periods of unemployment should not be wasted. "Security [in periods of non-employment] is necessary for the poorest not only to improve their skills in fields of their choice, but also to be part of cultural enrichment, thus preparing themselves for inventing completely new areas of activity".[6] A "culture of work" may disappear because of long periods of idleness. Therefore, living in poverty undermines the ability of people to assume the basic responsibilities needed to fully participate in employment.

12. The International Movement ATD Fourth World notes that in Europe government employment agencies geared at helping people find work are often seen negatively by excluded people, who have lost confidence in the system. Efforts should be made to overcome this mistrust and rebuild confidence in both employment institutions and the people that they are supporting. Even if very excluded people obtain employment, most often it is an irregular job, with low pay, with long or night shifts, and with few or absent associated benefits. These jobs lack elements of decent work that could provide families with enough resources to live in dignity.

Recommendations

13. Through the experience of the work of the International Movement ATD Fourth World alongside people living in poverty in developing inclusive employment programmes, the following are recommendations are made:

Supporting the poor in returning to the labour market requires a sustained and long-term effort. Where possible, programmes should be long term since improving the access of people living in poverty to employment requires meaningful capacity-building. Additional support is required to help people to tackle personal and family challenges, and effectively assume job responsibilities. In traditional employment programmes and agencies, success is often measured by numbers of people trained and placed into jobs. There is a tendency in such programmes to select the strongest and potentially employable participants, excluding the more "difficult" ones. Employment programmes

[6] DESA and ATD Fourth World (December, 1999). Redefining human-rights based development: the Wresinski approach to partnership with the poorest. ESA/DSPD/BP3

must prioritize the most excluded, and include them in the evaluation of such programmes. These programmes need time to be evaluated for achievements if there are to be long-term positive outcomes.

Employment should not be given in the form of charity or enforced. People living in extreme poverty need security and genuine participation in society. Efforts are needed to influence employers, governments and agencies as they work towards truly inclusive employment. Policies should be developed that include the most excluded in a dignified manner and builds on what they have to contribute. "Nobody should be forced to accept just any job or other activity for the only reason that there is no choice. (...) the poorest fear the emergence of a new form of forced labour."[7] Efforts should be made to avoid enclosing the most excluded in "special" work programmes which separate them from the rest of economy and society.

Finally, globally, labour markets are becoming more competitive, leaving fewer labour-intensive jobs. Both the formal and informal sectors are an important source of employment, but low minimum wages remain a problem for the "working poor". Improving working conditions in both sectors, maintaining and creating labour-intensive jobs, and securing decent work for all people, and especially for the most excluded, are parts of this global challenge. The international community and all countries should therefore evaluate the impact of overall employment policies and economic growth from the perspective of the lives of the most excluded and to promote social cohesion.

Access to decent, safe and fulfilling work is fundamental to the achievement of social development, and people in poverty are the first actors in efforts to secure dignified work. Their daily efforts should be harnessed and supported, and their experiences capitalized on, to develop long-term, inclusive and harmonious employment for all.

[7] Furrer, H., Blunschi, M., et al. (May, 2005). Integration and social cohesion. The ATD Fourth World approach: the experience and expectations of the poorest as the paradigmatic model for the struggle for integration and social cohesion. By ATD Fourth World, Lucerne, Switzerland.